

# Silent Screams: Incarcerated Survivors of Family Violence

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A mother robin built her nest just outside my second story window this past spring so our family has been a witness to the wonders of robin life. It has been intriguing to watch the interaction between parent and offspring and the important role that vocalization has played. When the babies were quite young, their parent would perch on the side of the nest with succulent worms for empty bellies. Initially, the parent would chirp to wake the sleeping babies and their beaks would open wide for the meal. After a few days, however, as soon as the parent perched on the nest, those beaks would open and the babies would chirp insistently for their meal. One eager baby left the nest before he was able to fend for himself. It was interesting to watch him hide in a low-lying bush and chirp for his parent. Eventually, the parent found the baby because he was listening for his chirp and together they hopped off, intent on learning how to find food. This type of conditioned learning and response to vocalization is familiar to all of us and we bear witness to it in multiple venues. A mother nursing her infant experiences a significant lactation response to the cry of her baby. Parents supervising children on a noisy playground are particularly attuned to the cry of their child over the noise, screams, and crying of all the other children.

“Voice” has been an important theoretical and philosophical component of feminist theory as well as in work with battered women. Great strides have been made in the past decades on valuing the voice of women and breaking the old patriarchal models that insisted that women and children should be seen but not heard. There is much to celebrate and yet much work to be done. This author would argue, however, that as a society, we have taken a huge step backwards in terms of the vast numbers of women we are marginalizing annually through incarceration. By all measures, the numbers of women locked up each year has grown at a tsunami pace and overburdened systems are taxed even more by the complex needs that the female inmate presents. The vast majority of incarcerated women are found guilty of non-violent property crimes, often drug related. A recent study revealed that up to 99% of the women incarcerated in our nation’s correctional facilities have been victims of abuse.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, trauma from a lifetime of victimization is

one of the key components in a woman’s use or abuse of substances.<sup>2</sup> One study demonstrated the reciprocal relationship between domestic violence and substance abuse and concluded that the presence of either one increases the likelihood of the other co-occurring.<sup>3</sup>

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Female inmates with a history of victimization and abuse, experience incarceration differently than do those who do not have a victimization history. “The prison environment can send women into crisis with past memories and feelings associated with childhood abuse being reactivated and familiar coping strategies such as self-harm, substance use, and aggression being adopted.”<sup>4</sup> Since Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a common diagnosis for incarcerated

women, it is safe to assume that traumatized individuals will experience triggers during incarceration and may be unable to understand or explain their experience. They are effectively silenced.

The noise of a correctional facility is overwhelming. Soundproofing is non-existent and the cacophony of voices bouncing off of concrete walls and floors can be overwhelming. And yet paradoxically, the screams of incarcerated women belie voicelessness—a silence that is deafening. Society at large does not appear eager to hear the screams of this silent population; the needs of incarcerated individuals does not place high on county, state, or federal budgets, particularly when government coffers are so lean. And yet the silence of their screams echoes across our nation and deserve to be heard. They desperately need to be heard by domestic violence professionals and advocates as well as politicians and taxpayers.

Providing abuse awareness services in a correctional facility is challenging to be sure. Security is the number-one concern of correctional facilities and advocates who go behind the razor wire and bars can expect that it is not an easy place to do advocacy work. And yet, it is an essential service we need to be providing to incarcerated victims who need a voice, need validation of their voice, desire that their voice be honored and then amplified so those outside the bars know they are silent no more.

## Giving Voice: Breaking Silence

Women who are survivors of multiple abuse/trauma tend to have great difficulty in identifying and naming their emotions as well as regulating maladaptive emotions. The experience of repeated trauma has silenced adaptive emotional expression while often increasing maladaptive emotional expression.<sup>5</sup> They have learned to either avoid or suppress potent emotions or to give powerful voice to more accepted emotions such as displaced anger.<sup>6</sup> If they have tried to give voice to their pain, it is often not heard, not validated, or ignored. A community of unspoken agreement or a society of silence may muffle their meek protest. Sometimes giving voice to their deep emotional pain only brings more pain and abuse so they learn to keep hidden the deep recesses of emotional wounding. Their pain is expressed through other avenues such as substance abuse, promiscuity, or self-destructive behaviors.<sup>7</sup> Their interpersonal relationships continue to provide opportunities for re-victimization and, unfortunately, they tend to parent the way they were parented so the cycle continues.

Additionally, for many, abuse is normal and it may take a while for them to acknowledge that what happened to them as a child or young adult was abuse. If she grew up seeing her mother treated violently, chances are she will accept violent treatment by intimate partners because this is “normal” for her. Breaking silence can be incredibly threatening to the incarcerated survivor. It may be that her perpetrator/s is her main source of connection to the outside world or the individual who is helping her with her case or providing money for her. It may be that she feels that naming her experience as abusive will be disloyal or dishonoring to individuals she feels very dependent upon. The power of groups cannot be overstated as a remedy for this difficulty in breaking silence. It is quite common for participants of a group to more readily label the experience of another as abuse rather than labeling their own experience as abuse. But, as the group continues and the supportive atmosphere is cultivated, eventually she finds her voice and is able to begin to name her experience. This is a very empowering experience and one that is well worth the wait that it often entails.

### Affirming/Validating Voice

Once she speaks, it is imperative that the group listens with respect, empathy, and affirmation. It is her story and she deserves to tell it in the manner that she chooses. But what if her story contains elements that make you or the group uncomfortable? What if she killed her infant child—whacked his head against a wall and threw him on the floor repeatedly? What if she willingly engaged in the sex trade and proudly boasts of her exploits? The stories that victims who are incarcerated often tell are not pretty and sanitized; they are raw and difficult. But it is imperative that we affirm and validate her story, setting aside our own convictions and opinions. She may test you to see how tolerant you are before she gives you the core elements of her story—the secrets she has never given voice to. It’s a test that as facilitators, we must pass and with flying colors if we hope to affirm her voice and story.

People of color and those in the lower socioeconomic classes are disproportionately found in correctional facilities. It is vital that we maintain a vigilant awareness of our cultural distinctive and the impact it may have on how a group functions. In our culture, Caucasian individuals are considered to be the “privileged” group and typically have greater power than those of ethnic descent. Sometimes the experience of incarceration serves to bridge the differences that culture and socioeconomic standing present; at other times, racial tensions and inequities will present themselves in the group. It is important that facilitators not prioritize the voice of one group member over another; that is allowing members of one ethnic or cultural group greater “air time” than members of another group. We must also strive to create groups and curricula that are culturally and ethnically sensitive and relevant.

We affirm and validate her voice and story when we hold it as a precious gift—a priceless gem. She has paid a dear price for her story and we dare not treat it as anything less than a pearl of great price. As a facilitator, I often remind my group participants that we hold what we are told by each other in confidence because we affirm that it is a gift of immeasurable value. The stories disclosed are not for common consumption; not fuel for gossip in the pod, and not to be denigrated by comparison with another’s story or to be used as a weapon or threat against another. They have high value and we treat them as such.

### Honoring Voice

A common dictum for domestic violence advocates is the notion that the woman is the expert on her life. We affirm and honor her perspective and her experience as well as consistently acknowledge her expertise on her experience. We honor her voice by empowering her to take control over her own life and her own choices rather than create another dependency for her. We honor her voice by minimizing power differentials and fostering egalitarian relationships within the group rather than a power-over or authoritarian stance. These key values of feminist theory that underpin our work with victims of abuse can logistically be tricky in a correctional facility. The facility grants you power over the group and expects that you will maintain control because security is their primary concern. So it can be challenging to strike the right balance between empowering participants and yet maintaining control while honoring their limited self-efficacy.

Honor does exist in correctional facilities but is very rarely given to the detainees. Officers receive commendations and medals for actions that while maintaining the safety and security of the facility often come at a detainee’s expense. On a daily basis, an incarcerated woman is subjected to harsh judgments, degrading comments, and intrusive actions against her personal space and sense of self. The power of an honoring relationship in a correctional facility cannot be overstated. We know that change for women in a battering relationship “Is often preceded by a transformative experience in which another person, one who stands outside the battering relationship, reflects the woman’s reality in a way that enables her to acknowledge and assess her risk more objectively.”<sup>8</sup> As an advocate working with incarcerated survivors we have the privilege of being the “one who stands outside” reflecting reality, truth, and honor back to each participant. The power of this transformative relationship changes lives. A relationship with an advocate who values, affirms, and honors her voice and perspective will change reality for the incarcerated survivor. She may still have a long time to serve behind bars and difficult choices upon her release but for a brief period of time, she was heard, affirmed, and honored.

### Amplifying Voice

Feminist theorists insist that the personal is political. In other words, we view personal problems (crime, abuse, addiction) in the context of the greater societal problems (sexism, patriarchy, racism, etc.). “Individual experience does not occur in a vacuum, it is one person’s encounter with the social and cultural context, which acts to inform and transform the inner meaning of that experience.”<sup>9</sup> As advocates working with incarcerated survivors of abuse, it is our responsibility to amplify their voice, to carry their stories to

those who have not ventured behind bars. We must take every opportunity to translate our concern for the plight of the incarcerated survivor into social activism. Their voices are not often heard in the outside world but we can carry their message and raise awareness so that change can occur for them and for society.

Some may be a bit uncomfortable with the notion of social activism but consider this: the vast majority of women who are incarcerated are mothers. The separation from their children and other family members is, in part, a reenactment of the isolation they may have experienced in violent relationships. Prisons are often located far away from urban areas, making it extremely difficult for families to visit their incarcerated loved one. Maintaining close relationships with children is very challenging and the disconnection she feels is incredibly difficult. In many families, if dad goes to prison, not much changes for the children; but if mom goes to prison, their whole lives are disrupted. If extended family members are not available to care for the children, they are placed in foster care. And the cycle continues. This inter-generational transmission of violence must be stopped! We cannot afford to continue to lock people up; there has to be a better solution.

So we amplify their voices—those silent screams. We advocate for them on the outside; we carry their message to those who have the power to make change. It is always fun to take someone into a facility for their first time; inevitably stereotypical ideas and notions come falling down and they often remark that “these women are just like me.” Yes, they are more like us than they are different, but their voices are not heard. Once we have heard their silent screams, it is our responsibility to work for change. The problem of crime and incarceration is multi-layered and no one solution will fix everything that is wrong with our system. It really will take all of us working together to find a solution. It is our responsibility to speak for them.

## Conclusion

Edmund Burke reminds us “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil [*family violence, abuse, crime*] is that good men [*and women*] do nothing.” In that spirit, I have listed some specific ways to get involved, although this list is by no means exhaustive or complete:

- Consider volunteering as a facilitator of abuse awareness groups in a local correctional facility (see [www.sistersinc.org](http://www.sistersinc.org) for more information).
- Encourage local domestic violence agencies to provide services to women incarcerated in your community.
- Use your creative abilities to communicate the plight of the battered incarcerated woman (art, poetry, music, creative writing, etc.).
- Contribute to organizations working with incarcerated survivors.
- Collaborate with correctional facilities to create a continuum of care for recently released survivors.
- Advocate for reform of mandated sentencing laws for non-violent offenders.
- Advocate for trauma-informed and gender-responsive strategies for female detainees on the part of law enforcement and departments of corrections (See Bloom, Owen & Covington for suggestions).<sup>10</sup>
- Organize a community response for a recently released detainee. This could include making contact with the individual, helping her access services available in the community, helping her with the transition back into society, creating a safety plan for and with her, helping her find a job, etc.

Working together, we can make a difference for incarcerated survivors and ensure that their screams are heard and that their silence is not golden.

<sup>1</sup> Reichert, J., Adams, S., & Bostwick, L. Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority. (2010). *Victimization and help-seeking behaviors among female prisoners in Illinois*. Retrieved from [http://www.icjia.state.il.us/public/pdf/ResearchReports/Victimization and help seeking behaviors among female prisoners in Illinois.pdf](http://www.icjia.state.il.us/public/pdf/ResearchReports/Victimization%20and%20help%20seeking%20behaviors%20among%20female%20prisoners%20in%20Illinois.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Bloom, B., Owen, B., & Covington, S. U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections. (2003). *Gender-responsive strategies for women offenders* (018017). Retrieved from <http://nicic.gov/Library/018017>.

<sup>3</sup> Illinois Department of Human Services, Bureau of Domestic and Sexual Violence Prevention. (n.d.). *Lessons from the Illinois substance abuse/domestic violence pilot initiative*. Retrieved from <http://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=38453>.

<sup>4</sup> Leeder, E. (2006). *Inside and out women, prison, and therapy*. (p. 123). Philadelphia, PA: Hawthorne Press.

<sup>5</sup> Elliott, R., Watson, J. C., Goldman, R. N., & Greenberg, L. S. (2004). *Learning emotion-focused therapy: the process-experiential approach to change*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

<sup>6</sup> Tull, M. T., Jakupcak, M., Paulson, A., & K. L. Gratz. (2007). The role of emotional inexpressivity and experiential avoidance in the relationship between posttraumatic stress disorder symptom severity and aggressive behavior among men exposed to interpersonal violence. *Anxiety, Stress & Coping*, 10(4), 337-351.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, L. S., & T. C. Bryan. (2007). Feminist therapy with people who self-inflict violence. *Journal of Clinical Psychology: In Session*, 63(11), 1121-1133.

<sup>8</sup> Zaplin, R. T. (2008). *Female offender: Critical perspectives and effective interventions*. (p. 324). Sudbury, MA: Jones & Barlett Publishers.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, L. S. (1994). *Subversive dialogues theory in feminist therapy*. (p. 50). New York, NY: Basic Books.

<sup>10</sup> Bloom, B., Owen, B., & Covington, S. U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections. (2003). *Gender-responsive strategies for women offenders* (018017). Retrieved from <http://nicic.gov/Library/018017>.